THE Association AGENDA
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October 20, 2003 www.csae.com

Ten Things Kids Think Are From the 'Olden Days'

One of the most important roles of the association executive today is ensuring that the organization and its members are prepared to cope with the sweeping change that is occurring around them.

Everyone is faced with rapidly evolving business models, new and unique customer demands, heightened competition, rapid product development and even faster product obsolescence, and increasing career specialization and dramatic rates of knowledge growth. It is important to track all of these trends, to assess what they might mean to our industry, our members, and our association into the future.

In doing so, it is important that you don't let complacency as to the rate of change set in among your membership base. That's why it can be useful to have a barometer that helps to measure the rate of change.

In my case, I track what my two boys - aged 8 and 10 - happen to think about the world around them. Their world is a very different one, in that there are a number of things that we take for granted that already to them are, "things from the olden days."

CD's. In my home, there are 12,000 (legally acquired) songs on various servers in the basement. Music is pulled through the home network and played through a "digital audio receiver," a computer-like entertainment device that will be common in homes five years out. Since I converted all of my music back in 1997 to digital format, the CD's have sat in various boxes, packed away, simply as a form of backup. That's why my son commented to his buddy a few years ago, when he was visiting, that he had "some of those things from the olden days," referring, of course, to CD's. (A few months back, I showed them some of my old LP records. That really freaked them out.)

35mm film. The other day, I headed out to Black's photography with a Compact Flash digital camera card in my hand to get some photos printed. "Where are you going with the film, daddy?" asked one. Which made me wonder, did they know what "real film" looked like? Not at all - since I've been doing digital photography since 1996, they've grown up in a world of pixels, not acetate. One day, I grabbed some negatives from an old set of photographs, and showed it to them. They were fascinated, but wondered how you got that thing into a computer to see the picture.

Airplane tickets. I'm serious! We travel a lot, we've been using e- tickets for as long as they can remember. I had a recent trip that involved an honest to goodness paper ticket, and they thought the red and green carbon paper was really neat.

TV Guides. Saturday mornings in our home are "cartoon mornings." It's the only day of the week we'll let them veg-out for a few hours and watch their favorite shows. I came down one Saturday morning, only to find both sons with very sad expressions. "What's wrong?" I asked. "There's no data, daddy" said one. "No what?" I asked? He pressed the button for the "electronic program guide" on the TV - we have digital
cable - and all the boxes showed the description, "no data." I guess there must have been some type of hiccup in the system. I went to the front door, grabbed the newspaper, took out the tv listing section, and said, "here, I'll show you how we did it in the olden days." They weren't impressed.

Analog clocks. Call these kids digital or what! We were fortunate enough to be out of town when the Great Northeast Power Failure of 2003 occurred. But both boys were very curious as to what the power outage would mean and its effects. "How do people go to sleep?" one asked. That was a new one - we weren't quite sure what they meant. Until we realized that both of them have grown up with

a digital clock beside their bed -- if they wake up at night, they check the time, and know it is time to go back to sleep. We've learned they can't even sleep without one.

TV's with knobs. One day, I mentioned that we didn't have such devices in the "olden days." "How did people change the channel?" they innocently asked. I realized that they had no concept that back then - what, 20 years ago at most? - that most people actually had to get up off the couch to change the channel. The thought seemed completely foreign to them!

Store clerks who punch in prices.. When my boys were 2 and 4, they use to play grocery store checkout. One would hand over the purchases, while the other would run the scanner and go "beep." They've grown up in a world of bar codes, and it is a rarity when
they see someone using an actual cash register where you type in the numbers.

Portable vacuum cleaners. "What's that?" the eldest asked the day we were moving into our ski cottage, pointing at our old portable vacuum cleaner. We've had a built-in vacuum system for almost a decade, and so he was mystified as to the nature of the device in front of him. They watched in awe as we used it the first time, particularly as we pulled it around bumping into walls and doors. One observed that it was kind of a "dumb design," in that it seemed to do more damage then good.

Analog thermometers. For years, as soon as we saw the bare hint of a fever, we'd quickly measure their temperature with a fancy digital thermometer. Which is why when they saw an old-fashioned, mercury glass thermometer at the doctor's office they were fascinated. How was it used, they wondered. Better yet, did it go beep when it was
finished?

A sky without the Space Station. Ever since they can remember, they've gone into our backyard at dusk on clear evenings, watching for the International Space Station and various satellites. They know that mommy and daddy will tell them precisely where to look, at what time, and in what direction the station or satellite will be traversing overhead. That's because they've grown up with a Web site called Heavens-Above, which will tell you the exact details, for any particular point on earth, where you can easily observe such orbiting wonders. To them, this is a normal and expected part of life-to me, it is fascinating that a system has evolved that lets me discover such magic.

The interesting thing is that each one of these examples, when examined in the larger sense, involves some type of sweeping industry, product or corporte change, which will mean dramatic change upon the change and careers of hundreds of thousands of people. That's your role as association executives -- preparing your members for dramatic change -- and don't ever think that the pace of change is going to slow down.

What's the point of all this? In but a few years, the world has changed to a sufficient degree that my boys are growing up in a world that is dramatically different, even from that which existed five years ago. I remain convinced that the rate of change is only going to increase, and that preparing people to cope with change is one of the most important skills we need to provide.

Ogden Nash once observed that "progress is great, but its gone on far too long." That might be a worthy sentiment for some, but those who think like that are ill-equipped to cope in a world of tomorrow that will continue to be unlike anything we know today.

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